

The Literature of the  
Elizabethan Age

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## 4) The Literature of the Elizabethan Age.

The period of a nation's greatest literary glory almost always coincides with that of some important event in the nation's history. Great men have generally great minds and their thoughts are as valuable to posterity as their deeds. The victory of the Athenian army over that of Persia resulted in the glory of the age of Pericles. The age of Louis XIV was caused ~~by~~ at least prepared by the wars of the Reformation and the conquests of French arms in Germany. The age of Augustus followed the Siege of Troy.

The Elizabethan age is, doubtless, the most important in English literature and, in seeking the cause ~~which~~ produced it we find it in the Reformation and, the conquest of the Spanish Armada. Previous to this time there had been no purely English literature. Chaucer, the only great writer before the Elizabethan age borrowed

very extensively from other literatures - principally the French and Italian. The less important authors who followed him imitated him but produced nothing worthy of note.

There was little inducement to literary work at that time. It was neither lucrative nor honorable. Dealing as it did with foreign customs and thoughts it failed to reach the hearts of the English people who did not encourage it. Some few wrote during this time in spite of discouragement. Others wrote but laid aside their productions. During the war there was very little time or inclination for literary work. Men's thoughts and energies now thoroughly awakened, were all directed towards the issue of the struggle. When at last the war closed they could not again settle down into the old, quiet routine. They must have some outlet for their energies. Many found this outlet in



literature. Accustomed to mix only of the affairs of the present they wrote of them in a straight-forward manner which was very popular.

Elizabeth and James too were both learned and both writers of no mean ability. They encouraged their subjects to literary work, and the fashion once set at court spread rapidly. The age produced an immense amount of literature much of which of course had very little merit.

The literature of this period is characterized by its delineations of human nature. Every phase of this wonderful subject is treated. The age afforded fields for the development of every virtue and every vice, every thought and impulse of which human nature is capable. Queen Elizabeth was almost powerless to achieve opposition to her people. Her revenue was insufficient to carry on any undertaking without their cooperation. It is their patriotism and love of adventure made them give.

Another characteristic of this period is the breadth of thought displayed. This was a quality almost indispensable to any one who dealt with Elizabeth. Her nature was such that no one could deal with her who had not a mind capable of understanding and coping with her whims. The relations with other nations so required that great minds should be at the head. Elizabeth was proud, capricious, and despotic but a deep thinker.

The tendency of the national mind was imaginative. Imagination lent a charm to the commonest and most prosaic occurrences of the day, and distinguished things which would have been otherwise unnoticed, or noticed only to be ridiculed.

The literature of the Elizabethan age centres around three points, The Court, the Church and the Theatre. Of these the Theatre was at that time far the most potent, being in

did almost the only means of communication between the writers and the people.

The English drama had existed long before this. As early as the twelfth century Miracle plays were used in teaching religion. These played upon the stage representations of the characters and scenes of the Scripture. Later the Moral plays were in vogue. They personified abstract qualities. The Interlude played in the intervals of a banquet resembled more than the others, the modern play.

The first English comedy, *Ralph Roister Doister*, was produced in 1540 by Nicholas Udall. It is written in rhymed verse and consisted of five acts. In 1562 Sir Thomas Lackville produced *Gorboduc* - the first tragedy. It was very well received but has little to recommend it now, except that it is the first English play written in blank verse. Many plays follow these in quick succession. The theatre became one of the most popular resorts of the day. All literatures

were ransacked to furnish material for the English stage. Theatrical property was very incomplete and imperfect. Scenery was unknown. All the parts were played by men and boys. Yet the theatre was an immense influence.

Just before Shakespeares time there were a few play-writers who abandoned the classic style and wrote for the popular mind. Chief among these was Marlowe, a man of humble birth but great talent. Friends sent him to Cambridge to study Theology but this resulted in making him a sceptic.

He returned to London, leading there a wild and dissolute life. He became a writer and actor. His first play "Damburbaines" is "a strange compound of inspiration and desperation" and reveals much of his character. He breaks all bonds of custom writing an free and easy verse the thoughts only he could form.

His "Faustus" is his greatest work. In many respects it excels Goethes "Faust" which is drawn

from it. As a poet he is almost unsurpassed. He was equally free and at ease in powerful, impassioned poetry, and in tender songs. His early and violent death - at the age of twenty-three - robbed England of one of her greatest minds.

But Shakespeare is the name which overshadows all others in English literature. This is the greatest intellect England has ever produced. It has been said truly "The world knows nothing of her greatest men." We find this to be true of Homer, Virgil and Milton and of Shakespeare. Of his life we know very little. Unlike most writers very little can be learned of him through his works. His characters are so numerous and varied that it is impossible to discover in which - if any his own nature is portrayed. He was born in 1564 and received a limited education. About 1586 he went to London and, falling in with Marlowe

and his associates became an actor and an author. His first work as play writer was in the rewriting of old plays. Some of these are now published with his plays. He was a great student of human nature, and was capable of sympathizing with it in any phase. He could place himself in any position and condition. With all the force and power of Marlowe, he adds to these a greater, nobler quality - that of reality. His characters, though of infinite variety, are all perfectly natural. He individualized classes, rather than represented one individual of a class. He would take a bare uninteresting story or history and by his mighty genius raise it into a new world of his own creation.

The sources from whence he drew his plays, were the same that the other authors used. But how different was his use of them and the result obtained! His plays are living realities, suited



to all men and all ages. It is difficult to determine the order in which his plays were produced. Judging from the apparent development of his mind as illustrated by them it is probable that "Love's Labour's Lost" and "The Comedy of Errors" were among the first to be produced and that "Othello" and "The Tempest" were among the last. This however can not be proved.

His work lost none of its grace sweetness and fire with the advance of time. The only change was in the increase of power and his grasp of human nature.

Next to Shakespeare in the English drama stands Ben Jonson. He was to England what Shakespeare was to the world. He represented in his plays only what he saw about him at that time and though very good his work could not equal that of the master-mind. His first play, "Every Man in his Humor" was his best. It was played in 1598 with Shakes.

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pear as one of the principal characters. His plots were always original and in this he excels even Shakespeare. He lived sixty-three years, producing during that time many good works. To him we owe the Masque, an allegorical representation for festive occasions, remarkable for its grace and lightness. One of his most graceful and tender works - "The Sad Shepherd" was one of his last. Like Shakespeare Johnson grew gentler as he grew older.

Beaumont and Fletcher bore more resemblance to Shakespeare than did Johnson. They were firm friends and produced most of their work in concert though it is probable that Fletcher was the greatest genius. It has been said that Beaumont's work in the partnership consisted principally in holding in check the volatile fancy of his companion. They produced many excellent works. Their plots are loose and irregular but their style is fresh and



vigorous. Beaumont was slow and careful. His judgement was much esteemed. His perception was finer. His expressions more delicate though less fluent than Fletcher's. But Fletcher excelled in fertility and in force. He survived Beaumont ten years and in that time produced a great many plays which have, however, little merit. His writings were always impulsive and reckless and are almost all marred by a taint of vice. Some of his poetry is exquisitely sweet and tender.

Philip Massinger succeeded him in the popular esteem. His work was graver and more elevated in character. Almost nothing is known of his life which was probably mostly spent in struggling against poverty. His writings though in many respects defective, in the expression of dignity and virtue are unsurpassed.

John Ford is a dramatist of very different

character from any other of Shakespeares successors. His forte is in expressing the emotions of the heart. In this he is almost equal to Shakespeare. Out of this field he is coarse, licentious and extravagant. His finest plays are "The Lover's Melancholy", "Love's Sacrifice", "The Brother and Sister" and "The Broken Heart." He won the hearts of all the people by their tender grace of his works.

The name of Spenser is the greatest among the court poets. There were many other poets during the Elizabethan age of none of them worthy of much notice. Wackvilles may be mentioned as the greatest between Chaucer and Spenser. He was born in 1536 and educated at both Cambridge and Oxford. In 1559 he with two other writers produced the "Mirror for Magistrates" the only valuable part of which is Wackvilles. In this he shows that he had great poetical ability. But it gave him no pleasure.

to exercise his talent and he soon turned his attention to statismanship.

Of Spenser's life we know but little. He was born in 1552 and as his parents were poor he received his education as a charity student at Cambridge. He began literary work at the age of sixteen or seventeen years. Disappointed in love he went to the South where he met Sir Philip Sidney in 1576. In that year he published the "Shepherd's Calendar" which made him the first poet of the day.

The "Faerie Queene" is his masterpiece. It was designed to consist of twelve books, representing the twelve virtues of Aristotle contending against their opposing vices - each represented by some knight who was for the favor of the "Faerie Queene". But six of these books were finished. The style is delicious resembling in its musical flow the Italian poetry. Description is his forte. His "Faerie Queene" has

been designated a book of pictures. In some particulars it is shockingly incongruous and it is rather tiresome, but its sweetness and tenderness make it one of the most famous works of the age. There is nothing impure violent or ugly in it. He published several of his smaller poems, all showing the tender delicacy of his nature. The "Epithalamium", his marriage song, has been called "the most glorious love song in the English tongue". He died in 1599 mourned by all England.

Among the minor poets of this age were Phineas and Giles Fletcher. They imitated Spenser each attempting an allegorical poem but with very poor success.

Samuel Daniel was distinguished for the purity, simplicity and elegance of his language but he lacks force and life.

Michael Drayton was a very prolific writer but his writings were not of much value.

Many of his shorter poems are sweet and graceful but his longer ones are tiresome and confused.

Waller's merit is that of a story teller. His works are known to classes who hardly know even the name of Spenser.

John Donne was a voracious student. His studies included Law and Theology. He was in his early years a sceptic but later his views changed and he entered the Church... becoming one of the ablest preachers of the time. His writings serious and poems had some good qualities but were marred by a too great display of his extensive knowledge.

Sir John Davies left us two poems - one on "Dancing", the other on the "Immortality of the soul." Both are argumentative poems.

Miss Henry Wotton is known through the well-known hymn - the "Character of a Happy Life."

George Herbert treats of religious subjects but in a cold passionless way.

The court literature of the Elizabethan age was not all poetry. Prose forms no small part of it. The prose romance "Euphues" published by John Lyly in 1578 took England by storm. Its style and language were stilted but found favor at court and soon became quite the fashion.

Sir Philip Sidney was born in 1554. He was remarkably smart as a child and was carefully educated. At the age of 17 he was sent to the continent to study. He came back highly accomplished. He was brave, honorable and just. He had been intended for public life but he was petted and fondled at court, a universal favorite. At length tired of this idle life he retired to Wilton and there wrote the "Arcadia" the greatest prose work which had yet appeared. It was rather fantastic and tedious but its underlying principles were pure and strong.



In 1581 he entered Parliament and soon after wrote his "Apology for Poetry" in reply to ~~a work~~ by Stephen Gosson. It is a work remarkable for the beauty and purity of its language. In 1585 the Queen appointed him Governor of Flushing. He received his death wound in the battle at Zutphen and by an act there distinguished himself forever. Dying himself he passed the cup of water untasted to a dying soldier near him with the words, "My necessity is greater than mine."

Sir Walter Raleigh was the most comprehensive spirit of the age. Poet, historian, statesman, commander, he could do anything he attempted and he left few fields untried. He was distinguished at school but left early and spent some years in the army. Pining of this life he worked his way into the graces of the Queen who soon made him prime favorite. In 1585 she granted him the right to col-

suize and govern parts of North America. He incurred Her Majesty's displeasure by marrying one of her maids of honor but was soon returned to favor. In 1895 he instituted a search for El Dorado which he firmly believed to exist. On his return to England he published an account of "The Discovery of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana." When James came to the throne Raleigh's popularity was at an end. He was soon tried for treason and thrown into prison. There he wrote his History of the world, his greatest work. He began with the creation bringing in his knowledge of theology, philosophy and metaphysics. The style is clear and straightforward. It treats of all nations, closing with the fall of the Macedonian Empire 170 B. C.

He intended to write an English epic but he had time to produce only a few miscellaneous poems. He was one of the most gifted speakers of the age. Few could withstand his eloquence.



Bacon ranks next in importance to Shakespeare among the Elizabethan writers. He was born in London in 1561. At thirteen he entered Cambridge and three years later went to France to study statecraft. He was suddenly recalled by the death of his father. Then he spent some time in the study of law and was finally admitted to the bar where he was very successful. He aspired to office but was held back by a powerful enemy. He was finally admitted to the house of commons and then advanced steadily but slowly until at last he became Lord High Chancellor. This position however he did not long retain, for he was accused and proved guilty of corruption. which he so strongly denounced in one of his essays. He was thrown out of office and allowed to spend the last years of his life in poverty and disgrace. His writings were varied. He devoted much time to Philosophy and discovered several important facts and suspected and suggested

many others. In his 'Novum Organum' he tried to teach the methods of investigation but was hardly successful. He is best known through his Essays. The edition published in 1597 contained only ten. In that of 1620 the number was increased to fifty-seven. These essays are extremely original and in a style peculiar to Bacon. Though they are very brief, their substance is so great and their meaning so subtle that after repeated readings some new meaning may be found.

His writings were strangely at variance with his life. He seems to have appreciated what a noble life should be and yet there is hardly one vice or bluish which he denounces that he does not himself possess. His views changed somewhat as time advanced and his ideas of human nature grew nobler. This may be seen by comparing the different editions of his essays.

It remains for me to speak of the literature

of the church. I have already mentioned Jones. I will speak now only of Hooker, the greatest divine of the age. He devoted fourteen years to his preparation for the ministry. In 1585 he was appointed Master of the Temple but at his own request was removed to a less pretentious office. He was very successful in his work. He labored under the disadvantages of a sickly body and a weak voice but his modest eloquence was heard and felt. His mind was deep and comprehensive. His style was serene and powerful. Thoroughly earnest in his work he threw his whole soul into it.

His "Ecclesiastical Policy" is the greatest theological work of the period. It was originally written in a controversy on church matters.

The work is incomplete, owing to the carelessness or design of his amanuensis his wife. But enough of it remains to give it the place it deserves in English literature.

In this I have attempted to give an account of the principal writers of the Elizabethan age with their characteristics. To some of them I have not been able to do full justice. Others are already almost forgotten and their places have been filled by others. But ~~such~~ Shakespeare, Bacon and Spenser still live in their works and no future authors can ever supplant them.

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